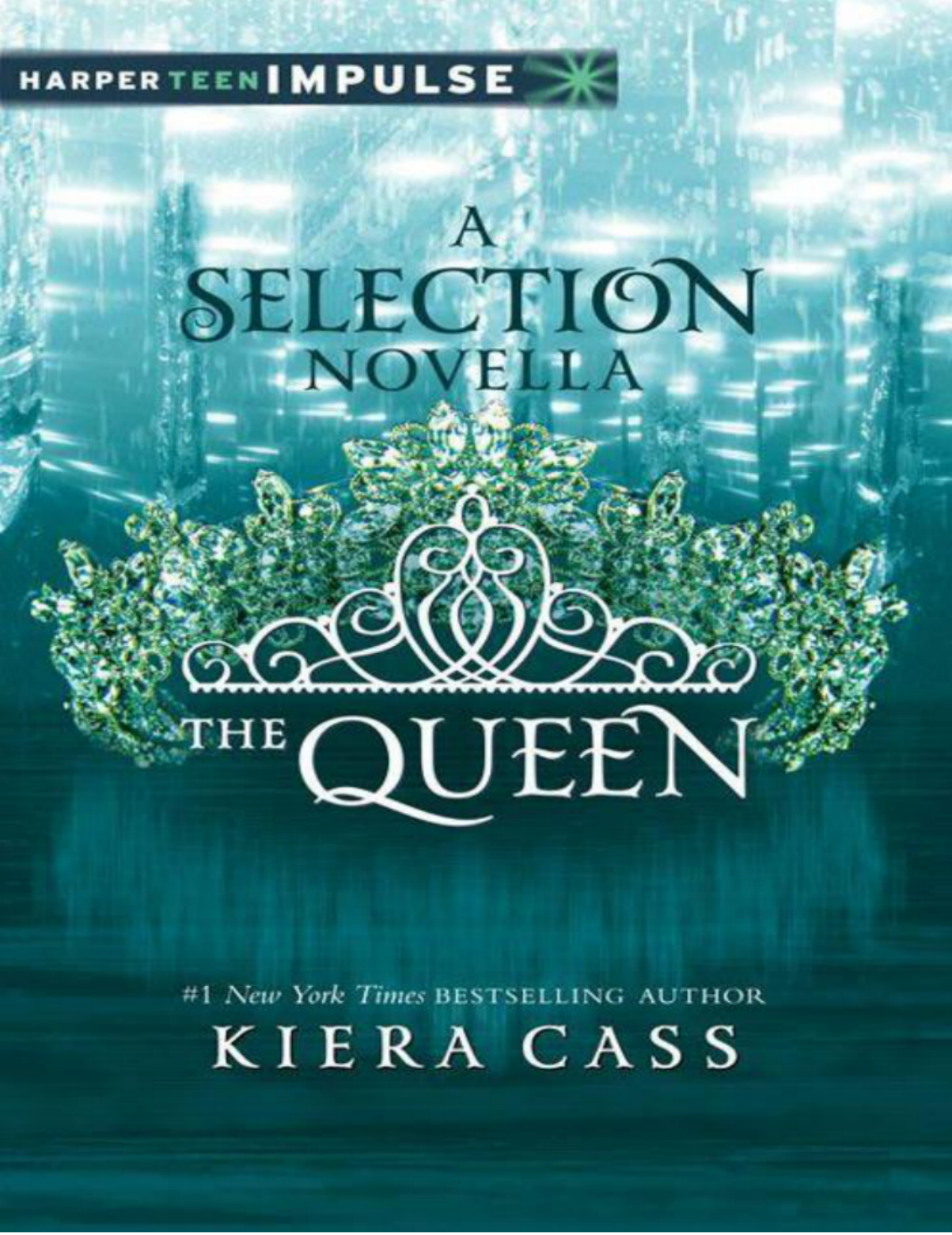

HARPER TEEN IMPULSE
A
SELECTION
NOVELLA
THE QUEEN
#1 New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KIERA CASS



THE QUEEN

KIERA CASS

HARPER TEEN
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CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11

Excerpt from *The Favorite*

Back Ads
About the Author
Books by Kiera Cass
Copyright
About the Publisher

CHAPTER 1

TWO WEEKS IN, AND THIS was my fourth headache. How would I explain something like that to the prince? As if it wasn't bad enough that nearly every girl left was a Two. As if my maids weren't already slaving away to fix my weathered hands. At some point I would have to tell him about the waves of sickness that crashed without warning. Well, if he ever noticed me.

Queen Abby sat at the opposite end of the Women's Room, almost as if she was purposefully separating herself from the girls. By the slight chill that seemed to roll off her shoulders, I got the feeling that we weren't exactly welcome as far as she was concerned.

She extended her hand to a maid, who in turn filed her nails to perfection. But even in the middle of being pampered, the queen seemed irritated. I didn't understand, but I tried not to judge. Maybe a corner of my heart would be hardened, too, if I'd lost a husband so young. It was lucky that Porter Schreave, her late husband's cousin, took her as his own, allowing her to keep the crown.

I surveyed the room, looking at the other girls. Gillian was a Four like me, but a proper one. Her parents were both chefs, and, based on her descriptions of our meals, I sensed she'd take the same path. Leigh and Madison were studying to be veterinarians and visited the stables as often as they were permitted.

I knew that Nova was an actress and had throngs of adoring fans willing her onto the throne. Uma was a gymnast, and her petite frame was graceful, even in stillness. Several of the Twos here hadn't even chosen a profession yet. I guessed if someone paid my bills, fed me, and kept a roof over my head, I wouldn't worry about it either.

I rubbed my aching temple and felt the cracked skin and calluses drag across my forehead. I stopped and stared down at my battered hands.

He would never want me.

Closing my eyes, I pictured the first time I'd met Prince Clarkson. I could remember the feeling of his strong hand as he shook mine. Thank goodness my maids had found lace gloves for me to wear, or I might have been sent home on the spot. He was composed, polite, and intelligent. All the things a prince should be.

I had realized over the past two weeks that he didn't smile too much. It seemed as if he was afraid of being judged for finding humor

in things. But, my goodness, how his eyes lit up when he did. The dirty-blond hair, the faded blue eyes, the way he carried himself with such strength . . . he was perfect.

Sadly, I was not. But there had to be a way to get Prince Clarkson to notice me.

Dear Adele

I held the pen in the air for a minute, knowing this was pointless. Still.

I'm settling in very well at the palace. It's pretty. It's bigger and better than pretty, but I don't know if I have the right words to describe it. It's a different kind of warm in Angeles than it is at home, too, but I don't know how to tell you about that either. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could come feel and see and smell everything for yourself? And, yes, there's plenty to smell.

As far as the actual competition goes, I haven't spent a single second alone with the prince.

My head throbbed. I closed my eyes, breathing slowly. I ordered myself to focus.

I'm sure you've seen on TV that Prince Clarkson has sent home eight girls, all of them Fours and Fives and that one Six. There are two other Fours left, and a handful of Threes. I wonder if he's expected to choose a Two. I think that would make sense, but it's heartbreaking for me.

Could you do me a favor? Will you ask Mama and Papa if there's maybe a cousin or someone else in the family who's in the upper castes? I should have asked before I left. I think information like that would be really helpful.

I was getting that nauseated feeling that sometimes came with the headaches.

I have to run. Lots going on. I'll send another letter soon.
Love you forever,
Amberly

I felt faint. I folded my letter and sealed it in the already-addressed envelope. I rubbed my temples again, hoping the slight pressure would give me some relief, though it never did.

"Everything all right, Amberly?" Danica asked.

“Oh, yes,” I lied. “Probably just tired or something. I might take a little walk. Try to get my blood moving and all.”

I smiled at Danica and Madeline and left the Women’s Room, making my way toward the bathroom. A bit of cold water on my face would ruin my makeup, but it might help me feel better. Before I could get there, the dizzy feeling swept over me again. Perching on one of those little couches that ran along the hallways, I put my head back against the wall, trying to clear it.

This made no sense. Everyone knew the air and water in the southern parts of Illéa were bad. Even the Twos there sometimes had health problems. But shouldn’t this—escaping into the clean air, good food, and impeccable care of the palace—be helping that?

I was going to miss every opportunity to make an impression on Prince Clarkson if this kept up. What if I didn’t make it to the croquet game this afternoon? I could feel my dreams slipping through my fingers. I might as well embrace defeat now. It would hurt less later.

“What are you doing?”

I jerked away from the wall to see Prince Clarkson looking down at me.

“Nothing, Your Highness.”

“Are you unwell?”

“No, of course not,” I insisted, pushing myself to my feet. But that was a mistake. My legs buckled, and I fell to the floor.

“Miss?” he asked, coming to my side.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “This is humiliating.”

He swept me up in his arms. “Close your eyes if you’re dizzy. We’re going to the hospital wing.”

What a funny story this would be for my children: the king once carried me across the palace as if I weighed nothing at all. I liked it here, in his arms. I’d always wondered what they’d feel like.

“Oh, my goodness,” someone cried. I opened my eyes to see a nurse.

“I think she’s faint or something,” Clarkson said. “She doesn’t seem injured.”

“Set her here, please, Your Highness.”

Prince Clarkson placed me on one of the beds dotting the wing, carefully sliding his arms away. I hoped he could see the gratefulness in my eyes.

I assumed he would leave immediately, but he stood by as the nurse checked my pulse. “Have you eaten today, dear? Had plenty to drink?”

“We just finished breakfast,” he answered for me.

“Do you feel sick at all?”

“No. Well, yes. What I mean is, this is really nothing.” I hoped if I

made this seem inconsequential, I could still make it to the croquet game later.

She made a face both stern and sweet. “I beg to differ; you had to be carried in here.”

“This happens all the time,” I blurted in frustration.

“How do you mean?” the nurse pressed.

I hadn’t meant to confess that. I sighed, trying to think of how to explain. Now the prince would see how my life in Honduragua had damaged me.

“I get headaches a lot. And sometimes they make me dizzy.” I swallowed, worried what the prince would think. “At home I go to bed hours before my siblings, and that helps me get through the workday. It’s been harder to rest here.”

“Mmm hmm. Anything besides the headaches and tiredness?”

“No, ma’am.”

Clarkson shifted next to me. I hoped he couldn’t hear my heart pounding.

“How long have you had this problem?”

I shrugged. “A few years, maybe more. It’s kind of normal now.”

The nurse looked concerned. “Is there any history of this in your family?”

I paused before answering. “Not exactly. But my sister gets nosebleeds sometimes.”

“Do you just have a sickly family?” Clarkson asked, a hint of disgust in his voice.

“No,” I replied, both wanting to defend myself and embarrassed to explain. “I live in Honduragua.”

He raised his eyebrows in understanding. “Ah.”

It was no secret how polluted the south was. The air was bad. The water was bad. There were so many deformed children, barren women, and young deaths. When the rebels came through, they would leave a trail of graffiti behind, demanding to know why the palace hadn’t fixed this. It was a miracle my entire family wasn’t as sick as I was. Or that I wasn’t worse.

I drew in a deep breath. What in the world was I doing here? I’d spent the weeks leading up to the Selection building this fairy tale in my head. But no amount of wishing or dreaming was going to make me worthy of a man such as Clarkson.

I turned away, not wanting him to see me cry. “Could you leave, please?”

There were a few seconds of silence, then I listened to his footsteps as he walked away. The instant they faded, I broke down.

“Hush, now, dearie, it’s okay,” the nurse said, comforting me. I was so heartbroken, I hugged her as tightly as I did my mother or siblings.

“It’s a lot of stress to go through a competition like this, and Prince Clarkson understands that. I’ll have the doctor prescribe you something for your headaches, and that will help.”

“I’ve been in love with him since I was seven years old. I whispered a happy birthday song to him every year into my pillow so my sister wouldn’t laugh at me for remembering. When I started learning cursive, I practiced by writing our names together . . . and the first time he really speaks to me, he asks if I’m sickly.” I paused, letting out a cry. “I’m not good enough.”

The nurse didn’t try to argue with me. She just let me cry.

I was so embarrassed. Clarkson would never see me as anything but the broken girl who sent him away. I was sure my chance at winning his heart had passed. What use could he have for me now?

CHAPTER 2

TURNED OUT CROQUET ONLY ALLOWS for a maximum of six players at a time, which suited me just fine. I sat and watched, trying to understand the rules in case I got a turn, though I had a feeling we would all get bored and end the game before everyone had a chance.

"Look at his arms." Maureen sighed. She wasn't speaking to me, but I glanced up all the same. Clarkson had taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. He looked really, *really* good.

"How do I get him to wrap those around me?" Keller joked. "It's not like you can fake an injury in croquet."

The girls around her laughed, and Clarkson glanced their way, a hint of a smile on his lips. It always came across like that: just a trace. Come to think of it, I'd never heard him laugh. Maybe the unexpected bubble of a single chuckle, but never anything where he was just so happy he exploded in laughter.

Still, the ghost of a smirk on his face was enough to paralyze me. I was fine with not seeing more.

The teams moved along the field, and I was painfully aware when the prince was standing near me. As one of the girls lined up a rather skillful shot, he darted his eyes over at me, not moving his head. I peeked up at him, and he turned his attention back to the game. Some girls cheered, and he stepped closer.

"There's a refreshments table over there," he said quietly, still not making eye contact. "Maybe you should get some water."

"I'm fine."

"Bravo, Clementine!" he yelled to a girl who'd successfully ruined another's shot. "All the same. Dehydration can make headaches worse. Might be good for you."

His eyes came down to meet mine, and there was something there. Not love, maybe not even affection, but something a degree or two beyond basic concern.

Knowing I was hopeless when it came to refusing him, I stood and walked over to the table. I started to pour myself some water, but a maid took the pitcher from my hand.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "Still getting used to that."

She smiled. "Not at all. Have some fruit. Very refreshing on a day like this."

I stood by the table, eating grapes with a tiny fork. I'd need to tell

Adele about that, too: utensils for fruit.

Clarkson looked my way a few times, seemingly double-checking that I was doing as he suggested. I couldn't tell if it was the food or his attention that lifted my mood.

I never did take a chance playing the game.

It was three more days before Clarkson spoke to me again.

Dinner was dying down. The king had unceremoniously excused himself, and the queen had almost completely emptied a bottle of wine by herself. Some of the girls started to curtsy and leave, not wanting to watch the queen as she sloppily propped herself up on her arm. I was alone at my table, determined to finish every last bite of the chocolate cake.

"How are you today, Amberly?"

My head shot up. Clarkson had walked over without me noticing. I thanked God he caught me between bites. "Very well. And you?"

"Excellent, thank you."

There was a brief silence as I waited for him to say more. Or was I supposed to talk? Were there rules about who spoke first?

"I was just noticing how long your hair is," he commented.

"Oh." I laughed a little as I looked down. My hair was nearly to my waist these days. Though it was a lot to groom, it gave me plenty of options for pulling it up. That was key for working on the farm or up in the factory. "Yes. Comes in handy for braiding, which is nice at home."

"Do you think it's maybe too long?"

"Umm. I don't know, Your Highness." I ran my fingers over it. My hair was clean and well taken care of. Did I somehow look messy without being aware of it? "What do you think?"

He tilted his head. "It's a very pretty color. I think it might be nicer if it was shorter." He shrugged and started to walk away. "Just a thought," he called over his shoulder.

I sat there for a moment, considering. Then, abandoning my cake, I went to my room. My maids were there, waiting as always. "Martha, would you feel comfortable cutting my hair?"

"Of course, miss. An inch or so off the bottom will keep it healthy," she replied, walking to the bathroom.

"No," I countered. "I need it short."

She paused. "How short?"

"Well . . . past my shoulders still, but maybe above the bottom of my shoulder blades?"

"That's more than a foot, miss!"

"I know. But can you do it? And would you still be able to make it pretty?" I pulled at the thick strands, imagining them cut off.

“Of course, miss. But why would you do that?”

I crossed in front of her, heading into the bathroom. “I think it’s time for a change.”

My maids helped undo my dress and draped a towel over my shoulders. I closed my eyes as Martha began, not completely sure what I was doing. Clarkson thought I’d look nicer with shorter hair, and Martha would make sure it was long enough that I could still pull it back. I lost nothing in this.

I didn’t dare to take a glimpse until it was all done. I listened to the metallic bite of the scissors over and over. I could feel as her snips got more precise, as if she was making everything uniform. Not long after that she stopped.

“What do you think, miss?” she asked hesitantly.

I opened my eyes. At first I couldn’t even tell a difference. But I turned my head ever so slightly, and a piece of hair fell over my shoulder. I pulled a strand over the other side, and it was as if my face was encircled by a mahogany frame.

He was right.

“I love it, Martha!” I gasped, touching my hair all over.

“It makes you look much more mature,” Cindly added.

I nodded. “It does, doesn’t it?”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Emon cried, running to the jewelry box. She fished through several pieces, searching for something in particular. Finally, she came up with a necklace that had large glittering red stones. I hadn’t been brave enough to wear it yet.

I lifted my hair, expecting her to want me to try it on, but she had other ideas. Gently, she laid the necklace across my head. It was so ornate, it was very reminiscent of a crown.

My maids all sucked in a breath, but I stopped breathing completely.

I had spent so many years imagining Prince Clarkson as my husband, but never once had I considered him as the boy who could make me a princess. For the first time ever, I realized I wanted that, too. I wasn’t full of connections or dripping with wealth, but I sensed it was a role that I would not simply fill but excel at. I’d always believed I’d be a good match for Clarkson, but maybe I could be a good match for the monarchy, too.

I looked at myself in the mirror, and along with imagining *Schreave* tacked on the end of my name, I placed *princess* right before it. In that instant I wanted him, the crown—every last piece of this—like nothing before.

CHAPTER 3

I HAD MARTHA FIND ME a jeweled headband to wear in the morning and left my hair completely down. I'd never been so excited about breakfast. I thought I looked positively beautiful, and I couldn't wait to see if Clarkson felt the same way.

If I was smart I'd have gotten there a bit early; but as it was, I ambled in with several other girls, completely missing my chance to get the prince's attention. I darted my eyes toward the head table every few seconds, but Clarkson was focused on his meal, dutifully cutting his waffles and ham, occasionally glancing over to some papers beside him. His father drank coffee mostly, only scooping up a bite when he took a break from the document he was reading. I assumed he and Clarkson were studying the same thing and that both of them starting so early meant they were going to have a very busy day. The queen was nowhere to be seen, and while the word *hangover* was never said aloud, I could practically hear it in everyone's thoughts.

Once breakfast was over, Clarkson left with the king, off to do whatever it was they did that made our country work.

I sighed. Maybe tonight.

The Women's Room was quiet today. We had exhausted all the getting-to-know-you conversations and had grown accustomed to spending our days together. I sat with Madeline and Bianca, as I almost always did. Bianca came from one of Honduragua's neighboring provinces, and we had met on the plane. Madeline's room was next to mine, and her maid had come knocking on my door the very first day to ask my maids for some thread. Maybe half an hour later, Madeline came by to thank us, and we'd been friendly ever since.

The Women's Room was cliquish from the beginning. We were used to being separated into groups in everyday life—Threes over here, Fives over there—so maybe it was natural for that to happen in the palace. And while we didn't divide ourselves exclusively by castes, I couldn't help wishing we didn't do it at all. Weren't we made equals by coming here, at least while the competition lasted? Weren't we going through the exact same thing?

Though, at the moment, it seemed as if we were going through a bunch of nothing. I wished something would happen if only so we'd

have something to talk about.

"Any news from home?" I asked, trying to start a conversation.

Bianca looked up. "My mom wrote yesterday and said that Hendly got engaged. Can you believe that? She left, what, a week ago?"

Madeline perked up. "What's his caste? Is she climbing?"

"Oh, yeah!" Bianca lit up with excitement. "A Two! I mean, it gives you hope. I was a Three before I left, but the idea of maybe marrying an actor instead of a boring old doctor sounds fun."

Madeline giggled and nodded in agreement.

I wasn't so sure. "Did she know him? Before she left for the Selection, I mean?"

Bianca tipped her head to one side, as if I'd asked something ridiculous. "It seems unlikely. She was a Five; he's a Two."

"Well, I think she said her family did music, so maybe she performed for him once," Madeline offered.

"That's a good point," Bianca added. "So maybe they weren't complete strangers."

"Huh," I muttered.

"Sour grapes?" Bianca asked.

I smiled. "No. If Hendly is happy, then so am I. It's a little strange, though, marrying someone you don't even know."

There was a pause before Madeline spoke. "Aren't we kind of doing the same thing?"

"No!" I exclaimed. "The prince is not a stranger."

"Really?" Madeline challenged. "Then please, tell me everything you know about him, because I feel like I've got nothing."

"Actually . . . me, too," Bianca confessed.

I inhaled to begin a long list of facts about Clarkson . . . but there wasn't much to tell.

"I'm not saying I know every last secret about him, but it's not as if he's any old boy walking down the street. We've grown up with him, heard him speak on the *Report*, seen his face hundreds of times. We may not know all the details, but I have a very clear impression of him. Don't you?"

Madeline smiled. "I think you're right. It's not as if we walked through the door not knowing his name."

"Exactly."

The maid was so quiet, I didn't realize she'd approached until she was at my ear, whispering. "You're needed for a moment, miss."

I looked at her, confused. I'd done nothing wrong. I turned to the girls and shrugged before standing to follow her out the door.

In the hallway, she merely gestured, and I turned to see Prince Clarkson. He was standing there with that almost smile on his lips and something in his hand.

“I was just dropping off a package at the mail room and the post master had this for you,” he said, holding up an envelope between two fingers. “I thought you might want it right away.”

I walked over as quickly as I could without seeming unladylike and reached for it. His grin became devilish as he abruptly stuck his arm straight up in the air.

I giggled, hopping and trying desperately to clutch it. “No fair!”

“Come on now.”

I could jump fairly well, though not in heels, and even with them on I was slightly shorter than he was. But I didn’t mind failing, because somewhere in my sad attempts, I felt an arm wrap around my waist.

Finally, he gave me my letter. As I suspected, it was from Adele. So many tiny happy things were piling into my day.

“You cut your hair.”

I pulled my gaze from the letter. “I did.” I grabbed a section and brought it over my shoulder. “Do you like it?”

There was something in his eyes—not quite mischief, not quite a secret. “I do. Very much.” With that he turned and walked down the hall, not even glancing back.

It was true I had an idea of who he was. Still, as I saw him in day-to-day life, I realized there was much more to him than what I’d seen on the *Report*. That knowledge didn’t seem daunting, though.

On the contrary, he was a mystery I was excited to solve.

I smiled and tore open the letter right there in the hallway, moving under a window for the sake of the light.

Sweet, sweet Amberly,

I miss you so much it hurts. It hurts almost as much as it does when I think about all the beautiful clothes you’re wearing and the food you must be tasting. I can’t even imagine what you’re smelling! I wish I could.

Mama nearly cries every time she sees you on TV. You look like a One! If I didn’t already know the castes of all the girls, I’d never guess that any of you weren’t in the royal family. Isn’t that funny? If someone wanted to, they could just pretend those numbers don’t exist. Then again, they don’t for you in a way, Little Miss Three.

Speaking of which, I wish there was some long-lost Two in the family for your sake, but you already know there isn’t. I asked, and we’ve been Fours from the start, and that’s all there is to it. The only notable additions to the family aren’t good ones. I don’t even want to tell you this, and I’m hoping no one comes across this letter before you, but cousin Romina is pregnant. Apparently she

fell for that Six who drives the delivery truck for the Rakes. They're getting married over the weekend, which has left everyone sighing in relief. The father (why can't I remember his name? Ah!) refuses to have any child of his made an Eight, and that's more than some men years older than him would do. So, sorry you'll miss the wedding, but we're happy for Romina.

Anyway, that's the family you have right now. A bunch of farmers and a few lawbreakers. Just be the beautiful, loving girl we all know you are, and the prince will undoubtedly fall for you despite your caste.

We love you. Write again. I miss hearing your voice. You make things feel more peaceful around here, and I don't think I noticed it until you weren't here to do it.

Farewell for now, Princess Amberly. Please remember us little people when you get your crown!

CHAPTER 4

MARTHA BRUSHED THE KNOTS OUT of my hair. Even with it shorter, it was still a serious task considering how thick it was. I secretly hoped she would take her time. This was one of the few things that reminded me of home. If I closed my eyes and held my breath, it could have been Adele pulling the comb.

As I was picturing the slight gray tinge of home, hearing Mama hum over the constant sounds of delivery vans, someone knocked and I was pulled back to the present.

Cindly ran to the door, and the second after she opened it, she dropped into a curtsy. “Your Highness.”

I stood and immediately crossed my arms over my chest, feeling incredibly vulnerable. The nightgowns were so thin.

“Martha,” I whispered urgently. She peeked up from her curtsy. “My robe. Please.”

She rushed to get it as I turned to face Prince Clarkson. “Your Highness. How kind of you to visit.” I curtsied quickly, then moved my arms back to my chest.

“I was wondering if you might join me for a late dessert.”

A date? He was here for a date?

And I was in my nightgown, makeup stripped, hair half brushed. “Umm, should I . . . change?”

Martha handed me my robe, and I swooped it on.

“No, you’re fine as you are,” he insisted, walking into my room as if he owned it. Which, I guessed, he did. Behind his back, Emon and Cindly scurried out of the room. Martha looked at me for instruction, and after I gave her a quick nod, she left.

“Are you happy with your room?” Clarkson asked. “It’s rather small.”

I laughed. “I suppose if you’ve grown up in a palace it would seem that way. I like it, though.”

He walked over to the window. “Not much of a view.”

“But I like the sound of the fountain. And when anyone drives up, I hear the crunch of the gravel. I’m used to a lot of noise.”

He made a face. “What kind of noise?”

“Music being played on loudspeakers. I didn’t realize that didn’t happen in every town until I got here. And engines from trucks or motorbikes. Oh, and dogs. I’m used to barking.”

“Quite the lullaby,” he remarked, walking back to me. “Are you ready?”

I discreetly searched for my slippers, spotted them by my bed, and went to put them on. “Yes.”

He strode over to the door, then looked at me and extended his arm. I bit at my smile as I went to join him.

He didn’t seem to particularly like being touched. I noticed that he almost always walked with his hands behind his back and kept a brisk pace. Even now, as we made our way through the halls, he wasn’t exactly taking his time.

Considering that, I felt a thrill all over again at how he teased me with my letter the other day, and that he allowed me to be near him at all right now.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s an exceptionally nice lounge on the third floor. Excellent view of the gardens.”

“Do you like the gardens?”

“I like to *look* at them.”

I laughed, but he was completely serious.

We came to a set of open doors, and even from the hallway I could feel the fresh air. The room was lit by nothing but candles, and I thought my heart might explode from pure happiness. I actually had to touch my chest to make sure everything was still intact.

Three huge windows were open, leaving their billowy curtains tiptoeing in the breeze. In front of the middle window sat a small table with a lovely floral centerpiece and two chairs. Beside it was a cart holding at least eight different types of desserts.

“Ladies first,” he said, gesturing to the cart.

I couldn’t stop smiling as I approached. We were alone. He’d done this for me. It was every dream I’d had as a girl coming true.

I tried to focus on what was in front of me. I saw chocolates, but they were all shaped differently, so I couldn’t guess what was inside. Miniature pies with whipped cream that smelled lemony were piled in the back, while right in front of me were puffed pastries that had something drizzled over them.

“I don’t know how to choose,” I confessed.

“Then don’t,” he said, picking up a plate and putting one of everything on it. He set it on the table and pulled out the chair. I walked over, sat down, and let him push the chair in for me, and I waited for him to fix his own plate.

When he did, I found myself laughing again.

“Did you get enough?” I teased.

“I like strawberry tarts,” he defended. He probably had about five piled in front of him. “So, you’re a Four. What do you do?” He carved

off a piece of one of his desserts and chewed.

"I farm." I toyed with a chocolate.

"You mean, you own a farm."

"Kind of."

He put down his fork and studied me.

"My grandpa owned a coffee plantation. He left it to my uncle, because he's the oldest, so my dad and mom and me and my siblings all work on it," I confessed.

He was silent for a moment.

"So . . . you do what exactly?"

I dropped the chocolate back onto my plate and put my hands in my lap. "I pick the berries, mostly. And I help roast them in our factory."

He was quiet.

"It used to be buried in the mountains—the plantation, I mean—but there are lots of roads through there now. Which makes it easier to transport things, but it adds to the smog. My family and I live in—"

"Stop."

I looked at my lap. I couldn't help what I did for a living.

"You're a Four, but you do the work of a Seven?" he asked quietly.

I nodded.

"Have you mentioned this to anyone?"

I thought over my conversations with the other girls. I tended to let them talk about themselves. I'd told stories about my siblings and really enjoyed getting into some of the TV shows the others watched, but I didn't think I'd ever spoken about my work.

"No, I don't think so."

He looked to the ceiling and back to me. "You are never to tell anyone what you do. If anyone asks, your family owns a coffee plantation, and you help run it. Be vague and never, ever let on that you do manual labor. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

He eyed me a moment longer, as if to reinforce the point. But his command was all I needed. I'd never not do anything he asked me to.

He went back to eating, stabbing his desserts a bit more aggressively than he had before. I was too nervous even to touch my food.

"Have I offended you, Your Highness?"

He sat up a little taller and tilted his head. "Why in the world would you think that?"

"You seem . . . upset."

"Girls are so silly," he muttered to himself. "No, you haven't offended me. I like you. Why do you think we're here?"

"So you can measure me against the Twos and Threes and validate

your choice to send me home." I didn't mean to let that all come out. It was as if my biggest worries were battling for space in my head, and one finally escaped. I ducked my head again.

"Amberly," he murmured. I looked up at him from under my lashes. There was a half smile on his face as he reached across the table. Cautiously, as if the bubble would burst the second he touched my coarse skin, I placed my hand in his. "I'm not sending you home. Not today."

My eyes watered, but I blinked away the tears.

"I'm in a very unique position," he explained. "I'm just trying to understand the pros and cons of each of my options."

"Me doing the work of a Seven is a con, I suppose?"

"Absolutely," he answered, but with no trace of malice in his tone. "So, for my sake, that stays between us." I gave a tiny nod. "Any other secrets you want to share?"

He pulled back his hand slowly and started cutting into his food again. I tried to do the same.

"Well, you already know I get sick from time to time."

He paused. "Yes. What's that all about, exactly?"

"I'm not sure. I've always had a problem with headaches, and sometimes I get tired. The conditions in Honduragua aren't the best."

He nodded. "Tomorrow after breakfast, instead of going to the Women's Room, go to the hospital wing. I want Dr. Mission to give you a physical. If you need anything at all, I'm sure he'll be able to help."

"Of course." I finally managed to take a bite of the puffed pastry and wanted to sigh it tasted so good. Dessert was a rarity at home.

"And you have siblings?"

"Yes, one older brother and two older sisters."

He made a face. "That sounds . . . crowded."

I laughed. "Sometimes. I shared a bed with Adele at home. She's two years older than me. It's been so strange sleeping without her, I sometimes pile a bunch of pillows beside me to trick myself."

He shook his head. "But you have all that space to yourself now."

"Yes, but I'm not used to it. I'm not used to any of this. The food is strange. The clothes are strange. It even smells different here, but I can't quite pinpoint what it is."

He set down his utensils. "Are you saying my home stinks?"

For a second I worried I'd offended him, but there was a tiny, joking spark in his eyes.

"Not at all! But it's still different. Sort of like the old books and the grass and whatever cleaner the maids use all mixes together. I wish I could bottle it somehow to keep the smell with me always."

"Of all the souvenirs, that's by far the most peculiar one I've

heard," he commented lightly.

"Would you like one from Honduragua? We have some excellent dirt."

He tried to press away his smile again, still seeming afraid of letting himself laugh.

"Very generous," he commented. "Am I being rude, asking all these questions? Is there anything you want to know about me?"

My eyes widened. "Everything! What do you like most about your job? Where have you been in the world? Have you actually helped make any laws? What's your favorite color?"

He shook his head and gave me another one of those heart-crushing half smiles. "Blue, navy blue. And you can basically name any country on the planet, and I've seen it. My father wants me to have a very wide cultural education. Illéa is a great nation but a young one, all things considered. The next step in securing our position globally is making alliances with more-established countries." He chuckled darkly to himself. "Sometimes I think my father wishes I'd been a girl so he could marry me off to secure those ties."

"Too late for your parents to try again, I suppose?"

His grin faltered. "I think it's been past that for a while."

There was something more to that statement, but I didn't want to pry.

"My favorite thing about my job is the structure. There is order to it. Someone places a problem in front of me, I find a way to solve it. I don't like things left open or undone, though that's not typically an issue for me. I'm the prince, and one day I will be king. My word is law."

His eyes sparkled with delight at his speech. It was the first time I'd seen him impassioned like that. And I could understand it. Though I didn't long for power myself, I was aware of the appeal.

He continued to stare at me, and I felt something warm trickle through my veins. Maybe it was because we were alone, or because he seemed so sure of himself, but I was suddenly very aware of him. It felt as if every nerve in my body was attached to every nerve in his, and as we sat there, a strange electricity began filling the room. Clarkson circled his finger on the table, refusing to look away. My breathing sped up, and when I let my eyes drop to his chest, it looked as if his had, too.

I watched his hands move. They looked determined, curious, sensual, nervous . . . a list went on in my head as I stared at the little paths he drew on the table.

I'd dreamed of him kissing me, of course, but a kiss was rarely only that. Certainly he'd hold my hands or my waist or my chin. I thought of my fingers, still rough from years of labor, and worried what he

would think if I touched him again. At the moment, I desperately wanted to.

He cleared his throat and looked away, breaking the spell. “I should probably escort you back to your room. It’s late.”

I pressed my lips together and looked away. I’d watch the sunrise with him if he asked me.

He stood, and I followed him into the main hall. I wasn’t sure what to make of our late, brief date. It felt more like an interview, if I was honest. The thought made me giggle, and he looked at me.

“What’s so funny?”

I debated saying that it was nothing. I wanted him to know me, and that would eventually mean me getting past my nerves.

“Well . . .” I hesitated. *This is how you learn about each other, Amberly. You speak.* “You said you liked me . . . but you know nothing about me. Is that how you usually act with girls you like? Do you interrogate them?”

He rolled his eyes, not angrily but as if I should already understand. “You forget. Until very recently, I’d never—”

The sound of a door crashing open startled us out of our conversation. I recognized the queen instantly. I started to curtsy, but Clarkson pushed me sideways into another hallway.

“Don’t you walk away from me!” The king’s voice boomed across the floor.

“I refuse to talk to you when you’re like this,” the queen replied, her speech faintly slurred.

Clarkson put his arms around me, shielding me even more. But I suspected he needed the embrace more than I did.

“Your spending this month is outrageous!” the king roared. “You can’t go on like this. It’s that kind of behavior that sends this country into the hands of the rebels!”

“Oh, no, dear husband,” she replied, her voice drenched in fake sweetness. “It will send *you* into the hands of the rebels. And believe me—no one will miss you when it does.”

“Get back here, you conniving bitch!”

“Porter, let me go!”

“If you think you can bring me down with a handful of overpriced gowns, you are mistaken.”

There was the sound of one of them striking the other. Instantly, Clarkson let me go. He grabbed one of the door handles and turned, but it was locked. He moved to the other, and it opened. He grabbed my arm and forced me inside, shutting the door behind us.

He started pacing, gripping his hair with his hands as if he was tempted to rip it all out. He moved to the couch, grabbed a pillow, and tore it to threads. When he’d finished with that one, he moved on

to a second.

He smashed a small end table.

Threw several vases against the stonework of the fireplace.

Tore the curtains.

Meanwhile, I pressed my body against the wall by the door, trying to make myself invisible. Maybe I should've run or gone for help. But I didn't think I could leave him alone, not like that.

When it looked as if he'd gotten most of his anger out of his system, Clarkson remembered I was there. He stormed across the room and stopped in front of me, a finger pointing at my face. "If you ever tell anyone what you heard, or what I did, so help me, God . . ."

But I was shaking my head before he finished. "Clarkson . . ."

The angry tears glistened in his eyes as he continued. "You never let on, you understand?"

I raised my hands to his face, and he flinched. I paused and tried again, moving even slower this time. His cheeks were warm, slightly tinged with sweat.

"There's nothing for me to tell," I vowed.

His breathing was so fast.

"Please, sit," I urged. He hesitated. "Just for a moment."

He nodded.

I pulled him to a chair and settled on the floor beside him. "Put your head between your knees and breathe."

He looked at me questioningly but obeyed. I put my hand on the back of his head, running my fingers over his hair and down his neck.

"I hate them," he whispered. "I hate them."

"Shhh. Try and calm down."

He looked up. "I mean it. I hate them. When I'm king, I'm sending them away."

"Hopefully not to the same place," I muttered.

He took a breath. And then he laughed. It was a deep, genuine laugh, the kind you can't stop even if you want to. So he *could* laugh. It was buried, that was all, hidden behind all the other things he had to feel and think and manage. He made much more sense now, and I'd never take one of his smiles for granted again. Those must be so much work for him.

"It's a miracle they haven't torn down the palace." He sighed, finally calming down.

Risking his flying off the handle again, I dared a question. "Has it always been like that?"

He nodded. "Well, not so much when I was little. They can't stand each other now, though. I've never figured out where it came from. They're both faithful. Or, if they're having affairs, they're doing an excellent job of hiding them. They have everything they need, and my

grandma told me they used to be very much in love. It makes no sense."

"It's a hard position to be in. Theirs. Yours. Maybe it just wore on them," I offered.

"So that's it, then? I'm going to be him, my wife will be her, and we'll eventually implode?"

I reached up and put my hand on his face again. He didn't flinch this time. Instead, he leaned into my touch. Though his eyes were still marked with worry, he did seem to be soothed by it.

"No. You don't have to be anything you don't want to be. You like order? Then plan, prepare. Imagine the king, husband, and father you want to be, and do whatever it takes to get there."

He looked at me, almost with pity. "It's adorable that you think that's all it takes."

CHAPTER 5

I'D NEVER HAD A PHYSICAL before. I realized that if I did become princess, they would probably become a regular part of my life, and that horrified me.

Dr. Mission was kind and patient, but I was still uncomfortable letting a stranger see me naked. He took my blood, did numerous X-rays, and poked at me all over, looking for anything that might be amiss.

I felt exhausted when I left. Of course, I hadn't slept well, and that didn't help. Prince Clarkson had left me at my door with a kiss on my hand. And between being elated over the touch and worried about how he was feeling, it took me forever to fall asleep.

I walked into the Women's Room, a little nervous to look Queen Abby in the eye. I worried that she might have a visible mark on her somewhere. Of course, she could have been the one who hit the king. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

But I was positive I didn't want anyone else to.

She wasn't there, so I moved to sit with Madeline and Bianca.

"Hey, Amberly. Where were you this morning?" Bianca asked.

"Sick again?" Madeline followed.

"Yes, but I'm doing much better now." I wasn't sure if the physical was a secret or not, but I decided discretion was best for now.

"Good, because you've missed everything!" Madeline leaned in and whispered. "There are rumors that Tia slept with Clarkson last night."

My heart sank. "What?"

"Look at her." Bianca glanced over her shoulder to where Tia was sitting with Pesha and Marcy by the window. "See how smug she looks."

"That's against the rules," I said. "It's against the *law*."

"Hardly the point," Bianca whispered. "Would *you* turn him down?"

I thought about the way he'd looked at me last night, the way his fingers had glided on the surface of the table. Bianca was right; I wouldn't have said no.

"Is it true, though? Or just a rumor?" After all, he'd been with me for part of the night. Not all of it, though. There were plenty of empty hours between him leaving me and showing up for breakfast.

"She's being very coy about the whole thing," Madeline griped.

“Well, it’s really none of our business.” I picked up the playing cards they’d haphazardly slung around the table and started to shuffle.

Bianca threw back her head and sighed loudly, and Madeline placed her hand on mine. “It is our business. It changes the entire game.”

“This isn’t a game,” I answered. “Not to me.”

Madeline was about to say more, but the door flew open. Queen Abby stood in the entrance, looking furious.

If she had a bruise on her, she’d hid it very well.

“Which one of you is Tia?” she demanded. The entire room looked toward the window where Tia sat frozen, as pale as a sheet. “Well?”

Tia slowly raised her hand, and the queen marched back to her, murder in her eyes. I hoped whatever reproach Tia was about to get, the queen would escort her from the room for it. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the plan.

“Did you sleep with my son?” she asked, not bothering to be discreet at all.

“Your Majesty, it’s a rumor.” Her voice was barely a squeak, but the room stilled to such a degree that I was aware of Madeline’s breaths.

“That you have done nothing to stop!”

Tia stuttered, starting maybe five different sentences before choosing one. “If you leave rumors be, they die. Vehemently denying something always implies guilt.”

“So do you deny this or not?”

Trapped.

“I didn’t, my queen.”

If she told the truth or if she lied, I didn’t think it mattered. Tia’s fate was sealed before a word was said.

Queen Abby grabbed Tia by a fistful of hair and started pulling her toward the door. “You’re leaving right now.”

Tia screamed in pain and protested. “But only Prince Clarkson can do that, Your Majesty. It’s in the rules.”

“So is not being a whore!” the queen shrieked in return. Tia lost her footing and slipped so that the queen was literally holding her aloft by her hair. She stumbled to keep up as Queen Abby pushed her onto the floor in the hallway. “GET! OUT!”

She slammed the door and immediately turned to the rest of us. She took her time raking her eyes over our faces, making sure we knew her power.

“Let me make something very clear,” she began quietly, gliding slowly past chairs and couches of girls, looking glorious and terrifying at once. “If one of you little brats thinks you can come into my house and take my crown, think again.”

She stopped in front of a cluster of girls near the wall. “And if you think you can act like trash and still end up on the throne, you have another think coming.” She dug her finger into Piper’s face. “I will not stand for it!”

Piper’s face was flung back by the force of the queen’s finger, but she didn’t react to the pain until after Queen Abby had passed.

“I am queen. And I am beloved. If you want to marry my son and live in my home, you will be everything I tell you to be. Obedient. Tasteful. And silent.”

She wove her way through the tables and stopped in front of Bianca, Madeline, and me. “From now on your only job is to show up, be a lady, sit there, and smile.”

Her eyes met with mine as she ended her speech, and, stupidly, I thought that was a command. So I smiled. The queen was not amused, and she pulled back and slapped it off my face.

I let out a grunt and fell into the table. I didn’t dare move.

“You have ten minutes to clear out. You will be receiving the rest of your meals in your rooms today. I don’t want to hear so much as a peep out of any of you.”

I heard the door shut but still had to check. “Is she gone?”

“Yes. Are you okay?” Madeline asked, coming to sit in front of me.

“My face feels like it burst open.” I pulled myself up, but the throb from my cheek pulsed down my body.

“Oh, my goodness!” Bianca cried. “You can see her handprint.”

“Piper?” I called. “Where’s Piper?”

“Here,” she said through tears. I stood up, and she was already walking toward me.

“Is your face all right?” I asked.

“It hurts a little.” She ran her hand over the place where the queen had pushed her, and I could see a half-moon shape from her nail.

“There’s a little mark, but some makeup should cover it.”

She fell into my arms, and we held each other.

“What got into her?” Nova asked, voicing all our thoughts.

“Maybe she’s really protective of her family,” Skye offered.

Cordaye huffed. “It’s not like we haven’t seen the way she drinks. I could smell it on her.”

“She’s always so nice on TV.” Kelsa held herself, confused by the whole thing.

“Listen,” I said, “one of us will know what it feels like to be queen. Even from the outside, the pressure looks unmanageable.” I stopped to rub my cheek. It was burning. “For now, I think we should all avoid the queen as much as possible. And let’s not mention this to Clarkson. I don’t think talking poorly about his mother, no matter what she did, would be good for any of us.”

“We’re supposed to ignore this?” Neema asked outraged.

I shrugged. “I can’t force you. But that’s what I’ll be doing.”

I pulled Piper close again, and we all stood there, silent. I’d hoped maybe I’d form bonds with these girls over music we liked or learning to apply makeup. I never imagined it would be a unanimous fear that would bind us like sisters.

CHAPTER 6

I DECIDED I WOULD NEVER ask him. If Prince Clarkson was intimate with Tia, I didn't want to know. And if he wasn't and I asked, it would be like breaking our trust before we even built it. More likely than not it was a rumor, no doubt started by Tia herself to intimidate the rest of us, and look where that landed her.

These things were better off ignored.

What I couldn't ignore was the throbbing pain in my face. Hours after the queen struck me, my cheek was still red and pulsing with pain.

"Time for new ice," Emon said, giving me another wrap.

"Thank you." I handed her the old one.

When I came back to my room begging for something to help with the ache, my maids asked which Selected girl had hit me, vowing they would go immediately to the prince. I'd told them several times it was none of the girls. A servant wouldn't do it. And as far as they knew, I'd been in the Women's Room all morning, so that only left one option.

They didn't ask. They knew.

"I heard while I was fetching ice that the queen will be taking a brief vacation alone next week," Martha said, sitting on the floor by my bed. I'd sat facing the window, my view equally split between palace wall and open sky.

"You did?"

She smiled. "It seems the number of visitors has taken a toll on her nerves, so the king has asked her to take some time for herself."

I rolled my eyes. He yells about expensive dresses, then sends her on a holiday. I wouldn't complain, though. A week without her felt like heaven right now.

"Does it still hurt?" she asked.

I averted my gaze and nodded.

"Don't worry, miss. By the end of the day, it'll all be gone."

I wanted to tell her the pain wasn't the real problem. My true worry was that this was one sign of many that life as a princess might be challenging at best. At worst it would be horrific.

I tallied through what I knew. The king and queen loved each other at one point, but now they worked to contain their hatred. The queen was a drunk and consumed with possessing the crown. The king, at the very least, was on the edge of a breakdown. And Clarkson

. . .

Clarkson was doing his best to come across as resigned, calm, controlled. But underneath that, his laugh was childlike. And when he broke, it was a miracle he managed to find all the pieces of himself again.

It wasn't as if I was a stranger to suffering. At home I worked to the point of exhaustion. I endured sweltering heat. Even though being a Four should offer some level of security, I lived close to poverty.

This would be a new hardship to endure. That was, of course, if Prince Clarkson chose me.

But him choosing me would mean he loved me, right? And wouldn't that make it all worth it?

"What are you thinking about, miss?" Martha asked.

I smiled and reached for her hand. "The future. Which is pointless, I suppose. What comes will come."

"You're a sweet one, miss. He'd be lucky to have you."

"And I'd be lucky to have him."

It was true. He was everything I ever wanted. It was all the strings attached to him that frightened me.

Danica slipped into another pair of Bianca's shoes. "They're a perfect fit! Okay, I'll take these, and you take my blue ones."

"Done." Bianca shook Danica's hand and grinned from ear to ear.

No one told us to stay out of the Women's Room for the rest of the week, but all the girls opted to do just that. Instead, we gathered in groups and hopped from bedroom to bedroom, trying on one another's clothes and talking the way we always did.

Except it was different. Without the queen around, the girls turned into . . . well, girls. Everyone seemed a bit lighter now. Instead of worrying about protocol, or being perfectly ladylike, we let ourselves be the people we were before our names were drawn, the girls we were at home.

"Danica, I think we're close to the same size. I bet I have dresses that would work with those shoes," I offered.

"I'll take you up on that. You got one of the good sets. Also, Cordaye. Have you seen the things her maids make?"

I sighed. I didn't know what they did, but Cordaye's maids made fabric hang in ways I didn't see on anyone else. Nova's dresses were also a notch above everyone else's. I wondered if whoever won the Selection would have her pick of the maids. I depended on Martha, Cindly, and Emon so much, I couldn't imagine being here without them.

"Do you know what's strange to think about?" I said.

"What?" Madeline answered, rummaging through Bianca's jewelry

box.

"One day, it won't be like this. Eventually, one of us will be here alone."

Danica sat down with me at Bianca's table. "I know. Do you think that's part of why the queen is so angry? Maybe she's been alone too much."

Madeline shook her head. "I think that's by choice. She could have anyone stay as her guest if she wanted. She could move an entire household into the palace if it pleased her."

"Not if it bothered the king," Danica replied.

"True." Madeline went back to the box. "I can't get a read on the king. He's kind of detached from everything. You think Clarkson will be like that?"

"No," I answered, smiling to myself. "Clarkson is his own person."

No one added to the discussion, and I looked up to find Danica's devilish grin.

"What?"

"You've got it bad," she said, almost as if she felt sorry for me.

"What do you mean?"

"You're in love with him. You could find out tomorrow that he kicks puppies for fun, and you'd still be moony-eyed over him."

I sat up a little straighter. "He might marry me. Shouldn't I love him?"

Madeline chuckled, and Danica pressed on. "Well, yes, but it's the way you act, like you've been in love with him forever."

I blushed and tried not to think of the time I stole change from Mama's purse to buy a stamp with his face on it. I still had it on a piece of rough paper and used it as a bookmark.

"I respect him," I defended. "He's the prince."

"It's more than that. You'd take a bullet for him if you had to."

I didn't answer.

"You would! Oh, my goodness!"

I stood. "I'm going to grab some of those dresses. I'll be right back."

I tried not to be afraid of the thoughts in my head. Because if it was a choice between him or me, I didn't think I'd be able not to put him first. He was the prince, and his life was invaluable to the country. But more than that, it was invaluable to me.

I shrugged the thought away.

Besides, it wasn't as if it would ever happen.

CHAPTER 7

THE BLINDING LIGHTS IN THE studio always took some adjusting to. Adding the weight of the jeweled dresses my maids insisted I wear for the *Report* made the hour almost unbearable.

The new reporter was interviewing the girls. There were still enough of us left that it was easy to be skipped over, and, for the moment, that was my goal. But, if I had to be asked a question, it wouldn't be so bad to have it come from Gavril Fadaye.

The previous royal announcer, Barton Allory, retired the night the new Selection candidates were revealed, sharing the moment with his hand-chosen replacement. Twenty-two years old, from a respectable line of Twos and sparkling with personality, Gavril was easy to like. I was sad to see Barton go . . . but not that sad.

"Lady Piper, what do you think the primary role of the princess should be?" Gavril asked, the bright flash of his teeth making Madeline nudge me in the arm.

Piper gave him a winning smile and took a breath. Then another. Then the silence got uncomfortable.

It was then that I realized that we should all be slightly terrified of this question. I darted my eyes toward the queen, who would leave on a flight immediately after the cameras turned off. She was watching Piper, daring her to speak after she'd warned us to be silent.

I checked the monitor, and the fear in her face was painful to watch.

"Piper?" Pesha whispered beside her.

Piper finally shook her head.

Gavril's eyes said he was searching for a way to save this, to save *her*. Barton would have known what to do, for sure. Gavril was just too new.

I raised my hand, and Gavril looked up at me, grateful.

"We had such a long conversation about this the other day, I'm guessing Piper just doesn't know where to start." I laughed, and some of the other girls followed. "We all agree our first duty is to the prince. Serving him is serving Illéa—and that might seem like a strange job description, but us doing our part allows the prince to do his."

"Well said, Lady Amberly." Gavril smiled and moved on to another question.

I didn't look at the queen. Instead, I focused on sitting upright as

the stab of another headache started in. Maybe they were caused by stress? But if that was the case, then why did I get them for no reason at all sometimes?

I noted on the monitors that the cameras were not focused on me or even my row, so I allowed myself a tentative brush of my forehead. Of all the things, I could tell my hands were getting softer. I wanted to prop my head up on my arm completely, but that wasn't possible. Even if the rudeness would have been forgiven, the dress wouldn't allow me to bend that way.

I pulled myself up, focusing my breathing. The steady ache was growing, but I willed myself to stay upright. I'd worked through feeling sick before, and under much worse conditions. *This is nothing,* I told myself. *All I have to do is sit.*

The questions seemed to last forever, though I didn't think Gavril had spoken to all the girls. Eventually, the cameras stopped rolling. I remembered then that I wasn't quite finished. There was still dinner before I could go back to my room, and that usually lasted about an hour.

"Are you all right?" Madeline asked.

I nodded. "Tired probably."

We turned our heads to the sound of laughter. Prince Clarkson was talking to some of the girls in the front row.

"I like his hair tonight," Madeline commented.

He held up a finger to the ladies he had been speaking to and circled around the crowd, his eyes on me. I made a small curtsy when he approached, and as I stood, I felt his hand go around my back, binding us together and keeping our faces from the others.

"Are you sick?"

I sighed. "I tried to hide it. My head is throbbing. I just need to lie down."

"Take my arm." He held out his elbow for me, and I wrapped my hand around it. "Smile."

I lifted my lips. Despite the discomfort, it was easier with him there.

"Very generous of you to grace me with your presence," he said, just loud enough so the girls we were standing by could hear. "I'm trying to remember what dessert it is you like best."

I didn't answer but continued to look happy as we exited the studio. I let my smile drop once we were out the doorway, and when we reached the end of the hallway, Clarkson scooped me up.

"Let's get you to the doctor."

I clenched my eyes together. I was getting nauseated again, and my whole body was starting to feel clammy. But I felt more comfortable in his arms than I would have on a chair or bed. Even

with all the swaying, being curled up with my head on his shoulder felt like the best thing in the world.

A new nurse was in the hospital wing, but she was just as kind as she helped Clarkson get me into a bed, with my legs propped up on a pillow.

"The doctor is sleeping," she said. "He was up all last night and most of the day with two different maids, helping them deliver. Two boys back-to-back! Only fifteen minutes apart."

I smiled at the happy news. "There's no need to disturb him," I told her. "It's only a headache, and it'll pass."

"Nonsense," Clarkson replied. "Send for a maid and have our dinners brought here. We'll wait for Dr. Mission."

The nurse nodded and headed off.

"You didn't need to do that," I whispered. "He's had a rough night, and I'll be fine."

"I'd be remiss if I didn't make sure you were properly taken care of."

In my head I tried to turn those words into something romantic, but it sounded more as if he felt obligated. Still, if he had wanted to, he could have gone to eat with the others. Instead, he chose to stay with me.

I picked at my dinner, not wanting to be rude, but my head was still making me feel sick. The nurse brought some medicine for me, and by the time Dr. Mission showed up, his hair slick from a shower, I felt much better. The throbbing was more like a tiny pulse than a ringing bell.

"I'm sorry for the delay, Your Highness," he said with a bow.

"It's no problem," Prince Clarkson replied. "We've been enjoying a lovely meal in your absence."

"How is your head, miss?" Dr. Mission took my wrist in his fingers to check my pulse.

"Much better. The nurse gave me some medicine, and that did a world of good."

He pulled out a little light and shone it into my eyes. "Maybe you should take something daily. I know you try to fix them once they start, but we might be able to stop them from happening. Nothing for certain, but I'll see what I can get you."

"Thank you." I folded my arms over my lap. "How are the babies?"

The doctor beamed. "Absolutely perfect. Healthy and fat."

I smiled, thinking of the two new lives that started in the palace today. Would they be best friends, maybe? And grow up telling everyone the story about how they were born so close to each other?

"Speaking of babies, I wanted to discuss some of the results of your physical."

All humor left my face, left my whole body. I sat up straighter, bracing myself. I could read in his expression that I was about to be sentenced to something.

"Your tests show several different toxins in your bloodstream. If they're showing up this heavily after weeks of being out of your home province, my guess is that the levels were much higher when you were there. Now, for some people this wouldn't be an issue. The body responds, adjusts, and can live without any side effects whatsoever. Based on what you told me about your family, I would say two of your siblings are doing just that.

"But one of your sisters gets nosebleeds, correct?"

I nodded.

"And you get constant headaches?"

I nodded again.

"I suspect your body is not taking these toxins in stride. Between the tests and some of the more personal things you've told me, I think these bouts of tiredness, nausea, and pain will continue, probably for the rest of your life."

I sighed. Well, that wasn't worse than what I was experiencing now. And at least Clarkson didn't seem bothered by my condition.

"I also have reasons to be concerned about your reproductive health."

I stared at him, wide-eyed. In my periphery, I noticed Clarkson shift in his seat.

"But . . . but why? My mother had four children. And she and my father both came from large families. I just get tired, that's all."

Dr. Mission remained composed, clinical, as if he wasn't discussing the most personal parts of my life. "Yes, and while genetics help, based on the tests, it seems that your body would be . . . an unfavorable habitat for a fetus. And any child you might conceive"—he paused, flitted his eyes toward the prince before looking back at me—"might be unfit for . . . certain tasks."

Certain tasks. As in not smart enough, healthy enough, or good enough to be a prince.

My stomach rolled.

"Are you sure?" I asked weakly.

Clarkson's eyes watched the doctor for confirmation. I supposed this was vital information for him.

"That would be the best case. If you manage to conceive at all."

"Excuse me." I leaped from the bed and ran down to the bathroom near the entrance of the hospital wing, flung myself into a stall, and finally heaved up every last thing in my body.

CHAPTER 8

A WEEK WENT BY. CLARKSON didn't so much as look at me. I was heartbroken. I had foolishly let myself believe it was possible. After we'd moved past the awkwardness of our first conversation, it seemed as if he'd gone out of his way to see me, to look after me.

Clearly that had passed.

I was sure that one day soon Clarkson would send me home. Sometime after that my heart would mend. If I was lucky, I'd meet someone new, and what would I say to him? Not being able to create a worthy heir to the throne was something theoretical, a far-off maybe. But not being able to create any sort of healthy child? It was too much to bear.

I ate only when I thought people were watching. I slept only when I was too exhausted not to. My body didn't care for me, so what did I care for it?

The queen returned from her holiday, the *Reports* continued, the days of endlessly sitting like dolls rolled blindly into one another. It was nothing to me.

I was in the Women's Room, sitting by the window. The sun reminded me of Honduragua, though it was drier here. I sat praying, begging God to have Clarkson send me home. I was too ashamed to write my family and tell them the bad news, but being around all these girls and their aspirations to climb castes made it worse. I had limits. I couldn't hope for that. At least at home I wouldn't have to think about it anymore.

Madeline came up behind me and rubbed her hand on my back. "You all right?"

I mustered a weak smile. "Just tired. Nothing new."

"You sure?" She smoothed her dress beneath her as she sat. "You seem . . . different."

"What are your goals in life, Madeline?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean just that. What are your dreams? If you could get the most out of life, what would you ask for?"

She smiled wistfully. "I'd be the new princess, of course. With tons of admirers and parties every weekend and Clarkson on a string. Wouldn't you?"

"That's a lovely dream. Now, if you were to ask the *least* out of life,

what would you ask for?"

"The least? Why would anyone go for the least they could have?" She grinned, joking even though she didn't understand.

"But shouldn't there be a least? Shouldn't there be a bare minimum that life should give you? Is it too much to ask for a job you don't hate, or for someone to truly have and hold? Is it too much to ask for one child? Even one some would call flawed? Couldn't I at least have that?" My voice broke, and I put my fingers over my mouth, as if my tiny bones would be enough to stop the hurt.

"Amberly?" Madeline whispered. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Really, I just need rest."

"You shouldn't be here now. Let me walk you to your room."

"The queen will get upset."

She chuckled once. "When isn't she upset?"

I sighed. "When she's drunk."

Madeline's laughter this time was lighter and more real, and she covered her mouth, hoping to avoid drawing attention. Seeing her like that helped my mood, and when she stood, it was easier to follow.

She didn't ask more questions, but I thought I might tell her before I left. It would be nice to have someone know.

When we got to my room, I turned and embraced her. I took my time letting go, and she didn't rush me. For that moment I got the least I needed out of life.

I walked to my bed, but before I crawled in, I dropped to my knees and folded my hands in prayer.

"Am I asking for too much?"

Another week passed. Clarkson sent two girls home. I wished with all that was in myself that it had been me.

Why wasn't it me?

I knew Clarkson had rough edges, but I didn't believe him to be cruel. I didn't think he would taunt me with a position I'd never have.

I felt as if I was sleepwalking, going through the motions of competition like a ghost rewalking her last steps over and over. The world felt like a shadow of itself, and I trudged across it, cold and tired.

It didn't take long for the girls to stop asking questions. Every once in a while I felt the weight of their eyes on me. But I'd moved beyond their reach, and they seemed to understand it was best not to bother with the stretch. I fell below the queen's notice. . . . I fell below most everyone's notice, and I didn't mind it too much down there, alone with my worries.

I might have gone on that way forever. But one day, a day as bland and weary as any of the others that had passed, I'd been so far gone

that I didn't notice as the dining room cleared. Nothing registered until a suit was standing across from me on the other side of the table.

"You're sick."

My eyes went up to Clarkson's and flitted away almost as quickly.

"No, I've just been more tired than usual lately."

"You're thin."

"I told you, I've been tired."

He slammed a fist on the table and I jolted up, startled into looking at his face again. My sleepy heart didn't know what to do with itself.

"You're not tired. You're sulking," he said firmly. "I understand why, but you need to get over it."

Get over it? *Get over it?*

My eyes welled up. "With everything you know, how could you be so mean to me?"

"Mean?" he retorted, practically spitting the word. "This is kindness, pulling you back from the brink. You're going to kill yourself like this. What will that prove? What will that even accomplish, Amberly?"

For as harsh as his words were, his voice seemed to caress my name.

"Worried you might not have a child? So what? If you're dead, there's no chance at all." He took the plate in front of me, still full of ham and eggs and fruit, and pushed it toward me. "Eat."

I wiped away the tears from my eyes and stared at the food. My stomach rebelled just seeing it. "It's too heavy. I can't take it."

He lowered his voice and came in closer. "Then what can you take?"

I shrugged. "Bread, maybe."

Clarkson stood back up and snapped his fingers, summoning a butler.

"Your Highness," he began with a low bow.

"Go down to the kitchen and bring back bread for Lady Amberly. Several types."

"Immediately, sir." He turned and nearly ran from the room.

"And, for God's sake, bring some butter!" Clarkson shouted at his back.

I felt another wave of shame. As if it wasn't bad enough that I was botching my chances with things I couldn't control, it was even more humiliating to ruin it with things I could.

"Listen to me," he pleaded softly. I managed to look at him again. "Don't ever do that again. Don't just check out on me."

"Yes, sir," I mumbled.

He shook his head. "I'm Clarkson with you."

And it was worth every speck of energy it took for the smile to

cross my face.

"You have to be spotless, do you understand? You need to be an exemplary candidate. Up until recently, I didn't think there'd ever be a need to tell you that, but now it seems I do: don't give anyone a reason to doubt your competence."

I sat there, stunned. What did he mean? If I'd had any more clarity of mind, I'd have asked.

Not a moment later, the butler returned with a tray full of rolls and twists and loafs, and Clarkson stepped back.

"Until next time." He bowed and left, arms tucked behind his back.

"Will this do, my lady?" the butler asked, and I dragged my tired eyes to the pile of food.

I nodded, picked up a roll, and bit.

It's a strange thing to discover how much you matter to people you didn't really know you mattered to. Or to find that the slow disintegration of yourself causes a smaller version to happen in other people.

When I asked Martha if she wouldn't mind bringing me a bowl of strawberries, her eyes welled up. When I laughed at a joke Bianca told, I noticed that Madeline sort of gasped before she joined in herself. And Clarkson . . .

The only other time I'd seem him really upset was that night we'd caught his parents fighting, and I sensed that his becoming slightly unhinged then was his way of expressing how much they meant to him. That he got so bothered over me . . . it wasn't my preferred way of him letting me know he cared. But if that's what he knew, it made sense.

That night when I tucked myself into bed, I promised myself two things. First, if Clarkson cared that much, then I was going to stop treating myself like a victim. From now on, I was a contender. Second, I was never going to give Clarkson Schreave a reason to get upset like that again.

His world looked like a storm.

I was going to be its center.

CHAPTER 9

"RED," EMON INSISTED. "YOU ALWAYS look stunning in red."

"But it shouldn't be so primary. Maybe something deeper, like a wine." Cindly pulled out another gown, much darker than the first.

I sighed with delight. "That's the one."

I didn't have the fire some of the other girls had, and I wasn't a Two—but I was starting to think there were other ways to shine. I'd decided that I was going to stop dressing like a princess and start dressing like a queen.

It didn't take much work to notice that there was a line drawn between the two. The Selected girls were given floral prints or dresses made with gauzy material. The queen's dresses were statements, bold and imposing. If my personality wasn't that way, at least my clothes could be.

And I was working on carrying myself differently. If I'd been asked back in Honduragua which was harder, roasting beans in the heat all day or trying to have decent posture for a solid ten hours, I'd have said the first. I was starting to wonder now.

It was the subtleties I wanted to master, the unnameable things that hung around a One. Tonight, on the *Report*, I wanted to look like the obvious choice. Maybe if I looked that way, I could feel that way.

Any time I felt a sliver of doubt, I thought of Clarkson. There wasn't a huge, defining moment between us, but when I worried I wasn't enough, I held on to the little things. He'd said he liked me. He'd told me not to check out. He might have walked away, but he'd also returned. That was enough to give me hope. So I put on my red dress, took a pill to prevent a headache, and prepared to do my best.

We weren't exactly prepped for when we would or wouldn't be asked questions or have a discussion. I assumed it was part of the Selection process: finding someone who could think on her feet. So I was disappointed when the *Report* ended without us getting a chance to speak. I told myself not to be bothered. There would be other opportunities. But while everyone around me sighed with relief, I was down.

Clarkson walked over, and I perked right up. He was coming this way. He was going to take me on a date. I knew it! I knew it!

But he stopped in front of Madeline. He whispered in her ear, and

she giggled as she gave him an enthusiastic nod. He held out a hand, allowing her to move forward, but before he followed her, he ducked back and murmured into my cheek.

"Wait up for me."

He left, not looking back. But I didn't need him to.

"Are you sure you don't need anything else, miss?"

"No, Martha, thank you. I should be just fine."

I'd dimmed the lights in my room, but I left my dress on. I nearly sent up for some dessert, but I felt certain he'd already have eaten.

I wasn't sure why, but I felt warm all over, as if my skin was trying to tell me tonight mattered. I wanted it to be perfect.

"You'll send for me, of course? You shouldn't be alone at night."

I reached for her hands, and she didn't hesitate to let me hold them. "As soon as the prince leaves, I'll ring for you."

Martha nodded and squeezed my hands before leaving me alone.

I ran to the bathroom, checked my hair, brushed my teeth, and straightened my dress. I needed to calm down. Every inch of my skin was awake, waiting for him.

I sat at my table, concentrating on my fingertips, palms, wrists. Elbows, shoulders, neck. I went piece by piece, trying to soothe myself. Of course, it was all rendered perfectly useless when Clarkson knocked on the door.

He didn't wait for me to answer. He walked right in. I stood to greet him, and I meant to curtsy, but there was something in his eyes that left me bewildered. I watched him saunter across the floor, his stare intent.

I pulled my hand to my stomach, willing the butterflies inside to still. They weren't having it.

Wordlessly, he raised a hand to my cheek, brushing my hair back, then left it under my chin. There was a hint of a smile on his face, just before he leaned in.

Growing up, I'd imagined a hundred first kisses with Clarkson. Apparently, I didn't dream big enough.

He guided me, holding me to him. I thought maybe I'd misstep or stumble, but somehow my hands were in his hair, clutching him as tightly as he was me. He bent and I curved into him, happily surprised at how well we fit.

This was joy. This was love. So many words you hear about or read about, and now . . . now I knew them.

When he finally pulled away, there were no more butterflies or flickers of nerves. An entirely new feeling was pulsing through my skin.

Our breathing was fast, but it didn't stop him from speaking.

“You looked stunning tonight. I thought you should know.” His fingers traveled down my arms, across my collarbone, and up into my hair. “Absolutely stunning.”

He kissed me once more and left, stopping to give me a final look at the door.

I wandered over to the bed and fell into it. I meant to call Martha and get her to help me out of my dress, but I felt so beautiful, I just let it be.

CHAPTER 10

THE NEXT MORNING MY SKIN would tingle without warning. Every move, every brush or breeze resurrected that warm feeling all over me, and my mind wandered to Clarkson each time it happened.

I caught his eye at breakfast twice, and he was wearing a similarly contented expression on both instances. It felt as if a delicious secret was hovering above us.

Though none of us were sure if the rumors about Tia had been true, I decided to take her expulsion as a cautionary tale and keep last night to myself. The fact that no one knew made it even better, more sacred somehow, and I stored it like a treasure.

The only downside of kissing Clarkson was that it made each moment away from him unbearable. I needed to see him again, touch him again. If anyone had asked me what I did that day, I'd never be able to tell them. Every breath was Clarkson's, and nothing mattered until I was in my room, dressing for dinner, the promise of seeing him the only thing keeping me together.

My maids were completely in tune with my thoughts on my new look, and tonight's dress was even better. A honey color, with a high waist and a bottom that belled out behind me. It was maybe a little too extravagant for dinner, but I loved it regardless.

I took my seat in the dining hall, blushing when Clarkson winked at me. I wished there was better lighting in here so I could really see his face. I was jealous of the girls on the other side of the room, with all the fading daylight falling in over their shoulders through the windows.

"She's glowering again," Kelsa muttered in my direction.

"Who is?"

"The queen. Look at her."

I peeked up at the head table. Kelsa was right. The queen looked as if the air itself was irritating her. She picked up a wedge of potato with her fork, eyed it, and slammed it back down on the plate.

I saw a few of the girls start at the sound.

"I wonder what happened," I whispered back.

"I don't think anything happened. She's one of those people who can't be happy. If the king sent her on a break every other week, it wouldn't be enough. She won't be satisfied until we're all gone." Kelsa was full of contempt for the queen and her vexing disposition. I

understood why, of course. Still, for Clarkson's sake, I couldn't bring myself to hate her.

"I wonder what she'll do once Clarkson chooses," I questioned aloud.

"I don't even want to think about it." Kelsa sipped from her glass of sparkling cider. "She is the only thing that makes me not want him."

"I wouldn't worry too much," I joked. "The palace is big enough that you can avoid her most days if you want to."

"Excellent point!" She looked around to see if anyone was watching. "You think they've got a dungeon we could put her in?"

In spite of myself I laughed. If there were no dragons to keep in a cage, she was close enough.

It happened so quickly, which I suppose was how it was meant to happen. I watched all the windows shatter almost simultaneously as objects flew through them. There were several shrill cries from the other Selected girls as the glass rained down, and it looked as if Nova got hit in the head by whatever had broken the window above her. She leaned onto the table, cradling herself, while some tried to look out and see where this had come from.

I eyed the funny things in the middle of the dining hall. They looked like very large soup cans. As I squinted, trying to make out some scrawl on the side of one closer to me, the can right by the door burst, spilling smoke into the room.

"Run!" Clarkson yelled as another can exploded. "Get out!"

Whatever their problems, the king clutched the queen's arm and pulled her out of the room. I saw two girls rush to the middle of the dining hall, and Clarkson ushered them away.

In seconds the room was filling with black smoke, and between that and the screams, I was having a hard time concentrating. I turned, looking for the girls who had been sitting beside me. They were gone.

They had run, of course. I spun again, but I was instantly lost in the smoke. Where was the door? I took a deep breath, trying to calm down, and instead found myself choking on the fumes. I sensed this was something worse than plain old smoke. I'd been a little too close to a bonfire before, and this . . . this was different. My body felt compelled to rest. I knew that was wrong. I should want to fight.

I panicked. I just needed to get my bearings. The table. If I could find the table again, all I had to do was turn right. I flung my arms around, coughing from breathing too fast and inhaling the gas. I stumbled and ran into the table, which was not where I thought it should be. But I didn't care—that was enough. I placed my palms on a plate, still covered in food, and ran my hands down the length of the

table, knocking over glasses and tripping over chairs.

I wasn't going to make it.

I couldn't breathe, and I was so tired.

"Amberly!"

I pulled my head up, but I couldn't see a thing.

"Amberly!"

I banged my hand on the table, coughing from the effort. I didn't hear him again, and all I could see was smoke.

I started banging the table again. Nothing.

I tried once more, and in the middle of striking the table, my hand came down on another hand.

We reached for each other, and he hurriedly dragged me away.

"Come," he managed, pulling me along. It felt as if the room would never end, but then my shoulder crashed into the doorframe. Clarkson held my hand, urging me to move forward, but all I wanted to do was rest. "No. Come."

We moved farther down the hall, and I saw a few other girls there, lying on the floor. Some were gasping for air, and at least two had vomited from the gas.

Clarkson pulled me past the last of the other girls and then we fell to the ground together, gasping in the clean air. There was no way that attack—and I was certain that's what this was—had lasted more than two or three minutes, but I felt as if I'd run a marathon.

I was lying on my arm in a very painful way, but it took too much effort to change positions. Clarkson wasn't moving, but I could see his chest rise and fall. A moment later he turned to me.

"Are you all right?"

It took all my strength to answer. "You saved my life." I paused, gasping. "I love you."

I'd imagined saying those words plenty of times, but never like that. Still, I couldn't be bothered to regret it as I drifted off, the sounds of the charging guards echoing in my ears.

There was something stuck to my face when I woke up. I reached and found an oxygen mask, kind of like the one I'd seen after Samantha Rail got caught in that fire.

I turned my head to the right and saw that the desk where the nurse usually sat and the door were practically beside me. In the other direction, nearly every bed in the hospital wing was occupied. I couldn't tell how many of the girls were here, which made me wonder how many of them were absolutely fine . . . or if any of them didn't make it.

I tried to sit up, hoping I could see more. And once I was almost upright, Clarkson saw me and walked my way. I didn't feel too dizzy

or short of breath, so I pulled off the mask. He was slow himself, still getting over the effects of the gas. When he finally reached me, he sat on the edge of my bed and spoke quietly.

"How are you feeling?" His voice was like gravel.

"How can . . ." I tried to clear my throat. I sounded strange, too. "How can that matter? I can't believe you went back in. There are twenty-some-odd versions of me here. There's only one you."

Clarkson placed his hand out, asking for me. "You're not exactly replaceable, Amberly."

I pressed my lips together, not wanting to cry. The heir to the throne had run into danger for my sake. The feeling that accompanied that knowledge was almost too beautiful to bear.

"Lady Amberly," Dr. Mission said, sweeping over. "Glad to see you're finally awake."

"Are the others well?" I asked, my voice so foreign.

He exchanged a quick glance with Clarkson. "On the mend." They were omitting something, but I'd worry about that later. "You were quite lucky, though. His Highness pulled out five girls, including yourself."

"Prince Clarkson is brave. I agree. I'm very fortunate." My hand was still in his, and I gave him a quick squeeze.

"Yes," Dr. Mission answered, "but forgive me if I ask whether the bravery was warranted."

We both turned his way, but it was Clarkson who spoke.

"Excuse me?"

"Your Highness," he replied quietly, "certainly you know your father would disapprove of you devoting so much time to a girl not worthy of you."

It would have hurt less if he'd hit me.

"The chances of her producing an heir are marginal at best. And you nearly lost your life rescuing her! I've yet to report her condition to the king, as I was sure you'd mercifully send her home once you knew. But if this continues, I will have to make him aware."

There was a long pause before Clarkson answered.

"I believe I heard several of the girls say your hands lingered a little too long as you examined them today," he said coldly.

The doctor's eyes squinted. "What do you—"

"And which one was it who said you whispered something very inappropriate in her ear? It doesn't matter, I suppose."

"But I never—"

"Hardly the point. I'm the prince. My word is above questioning. And if I even hint that you dared to touch my women in any way that wasn't professional, you might find yourself in front of a firing squad."

My heart was racing. I wanted to stop him, to tell him no one's life

needed to be threatened over this. Surely, there were other ways to get around the issue. But I knew that now was not the time to speak.

Dr. Mission swallowed as Clarkson continued to speak. “If you value your life at all, then I suggest that you don’t interfere with mine. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Dr. Mission said, throwing in a quick bow for good measure.

“Excellent. Now, is Lady Amberly in good health? Can she go to her room to rest in comfort?”

“I’ll have a nurse check her vitals at once.”

Clarkson waved his arm, and the doctor left.

“Can you believe he had the nerve? I should get rid of him anyway.”

I placed my hand on Clarkson’s chest. “No. No, please don’t hurt him.”

He smiled. “I meant that I’d send him away, find a suitable position for him elsewhere. Many of the governors like having private doctors. He’ll do well in something like that.”

I sighed in relief. So long as no one died.

“Amberly,” he whispered. “Before he told you, did you know you might be unable to have children?”

I shook my head. “I worried. I’ve seen it happen to others where I live. But both my oldest siblings are married, and they have babies. I hoped I would be able to, too.”

My voice hitched, and he hushed me. “Don’t worry about any of that now. I’ll come check on you later. We need to talk.”

He kissed my forehead, there in the hospital wing where anyone could see. All my worries disappeared, if only for the moment.

CHAPTER 11

"I HAVE A SECRET FOR you."

I awoke to Clarkson whispering in my ear. It was as if my body just knew to respond to him, and I wasn't even startled. Instead, I was gently stirred by his voice, and it was the sweetest way to wake up in the world.

"Do you?" I rubbed my eyes and looked at his impish smile.

He nodded. "Shall I tell you?" I giggled in reply, and he bent his head again to my ear. "You are going to be the next queen of Illéa."

I pulled back to see his face, searching for any hint of this being a joke. But, truly, I'd never seen him calmer.

"Do you want me to tell you how I know?" He seemed pleased with himself, to have surprised me so.

"Please," I breathed, still not believing his words.

"I hope you'll forgive my little tests, but I've known for a long time what I was looking for." He shifted in the bed, and I sat up so we were facing each other. "I liked your hair."

Instinctively, I touched it. "What do you mean?"

"There was nothing wrong with it when it was long. I asked several girls to cut their hair, and you were the only one who gave me more than an inch."

I stared, dumbfounded. What did that mean?

"And the night I came to you for our first date . . . do you remember that?" Of course I did. "I came late, when I knew you'd be ready for bed. You asked about getting changed, but when I said no, you didn't argue. You came with me, just as you were. The others shoved me into the hallway to wait while they dressed. I give them credit for being fast, but still."

I considered both of these things for a moment and confessed. "I don't understand."

He reached for my hand. "You've seen my parents. They war over nonsense. They are concerned to death with appearances. And while that is important for the sake of the country, they let it come between any sort of peace they could have, let alone happiness.

"If I ask you for something, you give it to me. You aren't vain. You're secure enough with yourself to put me before your looks, before anything. I know that from how you receive any request I've ever given you. But it's more than that. . . ."

He took a deep breath and stared at our hands, as if he was debating telling me.

"You've kept my secrets, and I assure you, if you marry me, there will be scores more to keep. You don't judge me, or seem startled by much. You're soothing." His gaze traveled up to my eyes. "I'm desperate for peace. I think you might be the only chance I have at that."

I smiled. "The center of your storm?"

He exhaled, looking relieved. "Yes."

"I would be happy to be that for you, but there's one small problem."

He scrunched his head. "Your caste?"

I'd forgotten all about that. "No. Children."

"Oh, that," he said, almost sounding as if he thought it was a joke. "I don't care one way or the other."

"But you have to have an heir."

"For what? To carry on the line? You're speaking of giving me a son. Suppose we managed to have one child and that child was a girl. There would be no chance of her getting the crown. Don't you think there are backup plans?"

"I want children," I mumbled.

He shrugged. "No guarantee you won't get them. Personally, I'm not fond of children. I guess that's what nannies are for."

"And your home is so vast you'd never hear one raise their voice."

Clarkson chuckled. "True. So, no matter what, that is not an issue for me."

He was so calm, so unconcerned, that I believed him, and the weight of all that worry fell off me. My eyes welled up, but I didn't allow myself to cry. I would save the tears for later, when I was alone.

"The true issue for me is your caste," he confessed. "Well, not for me so much as for my father. I'll need time to work out the proper way to address that, which means the Selection could go on for quite some time. But take heart," he said as he leaned in close, "you will be my wife."

I bit my lip, too happy to believe this was real.

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "You will be the only thing in this world that is truly mine. And I will put you on a pedestal so high, it will be impossible for anyone not to adore you."

I shook my head, dizzy with joy. "I don't know what to say."

He kissed me quickly. "Practice saying yes. When the time comes, I want you to be ready."

We leaned our foreheads into each other and stayed quiet for a moment. I couldn't believe this was real. He'd said all the words I'd ever hoped to hear: *queen*, *wife*, *adore*. The dreams I'd stored in my

heart were actually coming true.

"You should go back to sleep. That attack today was one of the cruelest ones yet. I want you to fully recover."

"As you wish," I said.

He ran a finger down my cheek, pleased with my response. "Good night, Amberly."

"Good night, Clarkson."

I tucked myself back into bed as he left, but I knew there was no way I'd be able to sleep now. How could I with my heart beating double time and my mind running through every possibility of our future?

I slowly rose and went over to my desk. I could think of only one way to get this out of my system.

Dear Adele,
Can you keep a secret?

EXCERPT FROM *THE FAVORITE*

While America Singer's heart was torn between Aspen and Prince Maxon, her friend Marlee knew exactly what she wanted—and paid the price.



by KIERA CASS

Read on for a sneak peek!

CHAPTER 1

I PULLED THE TOP LAYERS of my dress a little tighter over my shoulders. Carter was quiet now, and his silence sent deeper chills through my body than the lack of heat in the palace cells did. It had been horrific to hear his grunts of pain as the guards beat the hope out of him, but at least then I knew he was breathing.

I shivered as I drew my knees closer to my chest. Another tear slid down my cheek, and I was grateful for it if only because it was warm on my skin. We knew. We knew it could end this way. And still we met. How could we have stopped?

I wondered how we would die. A noose? A bullet? Something much more elaborate and painful?

I couldn't help wishing that Carter's silence meant he was already gone. Or if not, that he would go first. I'd rather have my last memory be of his death than suffer knowing that his last memory was of mine. Even now, alone in this cell, all I wanted was for his pain to stop.

Something stirred in the hallway, and my heart started racing. Was this it? Was this the end? I shut my eyes quickly, trying to hold back my tears. How had this happened? How had I gone from being one of the beloved members of the Selection to being labeled a traitor, awaiting my punishment? Oh, Carter . . . Carter, what have we done?

I didn't think I was a vain person. Still, nearly every day after breakfast, I felt like I had to go back to my room and touch up my makeup before heading to the Women's Room. I knew it was silly—Maxon wouldn't even see me again until the evening. And at that point, of course, I'd reapply all my makeup and change my outfit anyway.

Not that anything I was doing seemed to be having much of an effect. Maxon was polite and friendly, but I didn't think I had a connection with him the way some of the other girls did. Was there something wrong with me?

While I was certainly having a wonderful time in the palace, I kept feeling like there was something the other girls—well, some of them at least—understood that I didn't. Before being Selected, I had thought that I was funny and pretty and smart. But now that I was in the middle of a bunch of other girls whose daily mission was to impress one particular boy, I felt dim and dull and less. I realized I should

have paid much more attention to my friends back home who had always seemed to be in a rush when it came to finding a husband and settling down. They had spent their time talking about clothes, and makeup, and boys—while I had paid more mind to my tutors' lectures. I felt like I had missed some important lesson, and now I was woefully behind.

No. I merely needed to keep trying, that was all. I'd memorized everything from Silvia's history lesson earlier this week. I'd even written some of it down to keep handy if I forgot something. I wanted Maxon to think that I was smart and well-rounded. I also wanted him to think I was beautiful, so it felt like these trips to my room were necessary.

Did Queen Amberly do this? She seemed effortlessly stunning all the time.

I paused on the stairs to look at my shoe. One of the heels seemed to be snagging on the carpet. I didn't see anything, so I moved on, eager to get to the Women's Room.

I flicked my hair over my shoulder as I approached the first floor and went back to focusing on whether there was more that I was supposed to be doing. I really wanted to win. I hadn't spent much time with Maxon, but he seemed kind and funny and—

"Ahh!" My heel snagged on the edge of the stair, and I fell with a smack onto the marble floor. "Ow," I muttered.

"Miss!" I looked up to see a guard running toward me. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Nothing injured but my pride," I said, blushing.

"I don't know how ladies walk in those shoes. It's a miracle the whole lot of you don't have broken ankles all the time."

I giggled as he offered me his hand.

"Thank you." I started brushing my hair back and smoothing out my dress.

"Any time. You're sure you aren't hurt?" He looked me over anxiously, searching for scrapes or cuts.

"My hip hurts a little where I fell, but otherwise I feel perfect." Which was true.

"Maybe we should take you to the hospital wing, just to be safe."

"No, really," I insisted. "I'm fine."

He sighed. "Would you do me a favor and go anyway? If you were hurt and I didn't do something to help, I'd feel awful about it." His blue eyes were terribly convincing. "And I'd be willing to bet the prince would want you to go."

He made a fair point. "All right," I ceded. "I'll go."

He grinned, his smile ever so slightly crooked. "Okay then." He scooped me up, and I gasped in shock.

“I don’t think I need this,” I protested.

“All the same.” He started walking, so I couldn’t get down. “Now, correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re Miss Marlee, right?”

“Yes, I am.”

He kept grinning, and I couldn’t help but smile back at him. “I’ve been working hard to keep all of you straight. Honestly, I don’t think I was the best in training, and I have no idea how I ended up in the palace. But I want to make sure they don’t regret their decision, so I’m trying to at least learn names. That way if someone needs something, I’ll know who they’re talking about.”

I liked the way he spoke. It was as if he was telling a story, even though he was simply stating a fact about himself. His face was animated and his voice alight.

“Well, you’re already going above and beyond,” I encouraged. “And don’t be so down on yourself. I’m sure you were an excellent trainee if you were placed here. Your commanders must have seen great potential in you.”

“You’re too kind. Will you remind me where you’re from?”

“Kent.”

“Oh, I’m from Allens.”

“Really?” Allens was just east of Kent, above Carolina. We were neighbors in a way.

He nodded as he walked. “Yes, ma’am. This is the first time I’ve ever been out of my province. Well, second if you count training.”

“Same here. It’s kind of hard getting used to the weather.”

“It is! I’m waiting for fall to kick in, but I’m not sure they even have fall here.”

“I know what you mean. Summer’s nice, but not every day.”

“Exactly,” he said firmly. “Can you imagine how silly Christmas must look?”

I sighed. “It can’t possibly be as good without snow.” I meant that. I dreamed about winter all year. It was my favorite season.

“Nowhere close,” he agreed.

I didn’t know why I was smiling so much. Maybe it was because this conversation felt so easy. I’d never had an easy time speaking to a boy. Admittedly, I hadn’t had a lot of practice, but it was nice to think that maybe I didn’t need as much work as I had thought.

As we approached the entrance of the hospital wing he slowed.

“Would you mind putting me down?” I asked. “I don’t want them thinking I’ve broken a leg or something.”

He chuckled. “Not at all.”

He set me down and opened the door for me. Inside, a nurse was sitting at a desk.

The officer spoke for me. “Lady Marlee took a little tumble in the

hall. Probably nothing, but we just wanted to be safe."

The nurse stood right up, looking happy to have something to do. "Oh, Lady Marlee, I hope you're not too hurt."

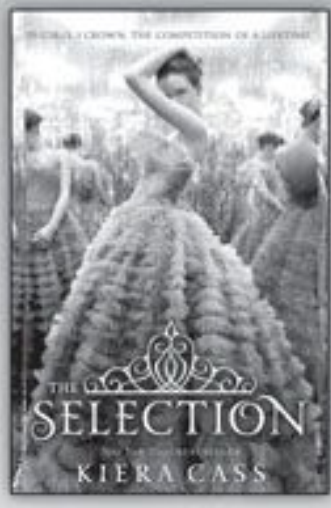
"No, just a little sore here," I said, touching my hip.

"I'll check you out right away. Thank you so much, officer. You can go back to your post."

The guard tipped his head to her and started to leave. Just before the doors closed, he gave me a wink and a crooked smile, and I was left there, grinning like an idiot.

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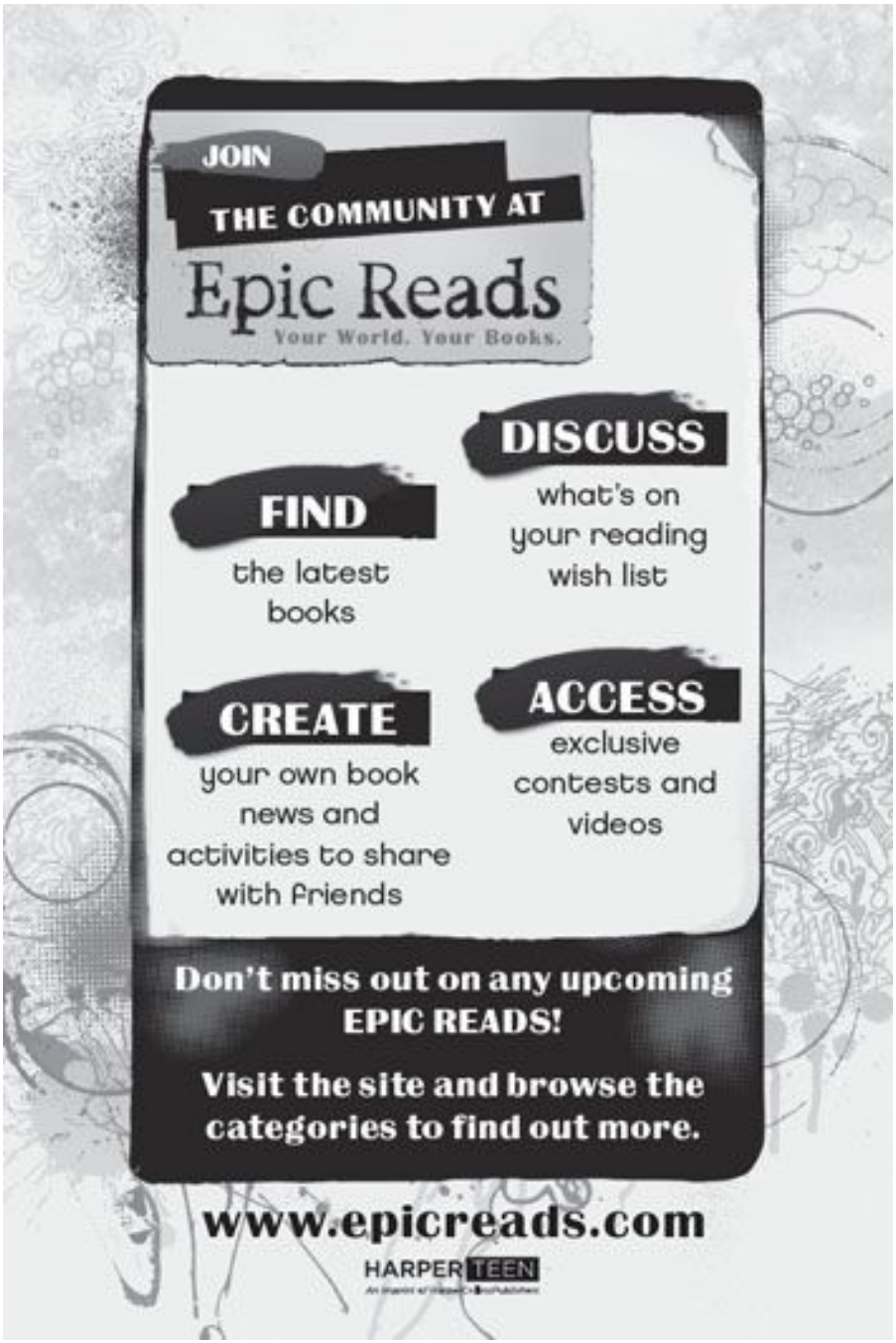
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KIERA CASS is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Selection series, as well as the self-published fantasy novel *The Siren*. She is a graduate of Radford University and currently lives in Christiansburg, Virginia, with her family. Kiera has kissed approximately fourteen boys in her life. None of them were princes. You can learn more about Kiera's books, videos, and love of cake online at www.kieracass.com.

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